TRUE CRIME MEDIA CONSUMPTION IN WOMEN: RELATING PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY AND VICTIMIZATION

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GRACE KATHERINE KERESTLY

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by

GRACE KATHERINE KERESTLY

APPROVED:

Dr. Shirley M. Eoff, Chair

Dr. Brittany Draper

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APPROVED:

Dr. Shirley M. Eoff
Director of the Honors Program

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ABSTRACT

Women make up a disproportionate portion of the audience for true crime media. This research investigates potential differences in perceptions between women who are high consumers of true crime media and those who are low consumers of true crime media as there is evidence to support that crime related media consumption can influence perceptions of safety and victimization (Morgan et al., 2015; Shah et al., 2020). A survey was conducted in order to identify low and high true crime consumers and examine their reported perceived likelihood of victimization, feelings of personal safety, and preparedness to avoid victimization. Findings of the following project support that women who do not consume true crime report greater feelings of preparedness to avoid victimization compared to those who are high consumers of true crime media.

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INTRODUCTION

The true crime genre tells the stories of real crime including many unpleasant topics such as rape, stalking, kidnapping, and murder. When considering the demographics of true crime consumers (those who read, watch, or listen to true crime media), it would seem reasonable to think that men, who perpetrate many of these violent crimes, would have a larger interest in true crime. In the United States, men commit approximately 78% of all homicides, 73% of all aggravated assaults, and make up 93% of all rape offenders (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2019). Despite men's apparent propensity to commit these types of crimes, women are much more interested in learning about them. Women's interest in true crime is reported to be disproportionate to men such that women comprise the main portion of true crime content patrons. Vicary and Fraley (2010) suggest that while men do enjoy other types of violent crime media, women are much more attracted to true crime, which is frequently evidenced by the demographics of those who consume true crime media (such as books on war). For example, when examining the demographics of Amazon.com book reviews, Vicary and Fraley (2010) found that 70% of the reviews on the examined books in the true crime genre were written by women. In contrast, women only wrote 18% of the reviews on the selected books in the war genre. While research has been done to look at the differences seen between men and women when considering true crime consumption, little to no research has examined differences between women who are low and high consumers of true crime media.

Publication Manual of the APA, 7th ed.

True Crime

True crime is a nonfiction genre of media that presents the details of real crimes using a narrative format (Franks, 2016). The true crime genre has been an important part of western pop culture for over 300 years. The genre evolved out of tales of morality designed to warn readers against ever-present dangers, create awareness, and encourage habits to increase personal safety (Franks, 2016). True crime stories have persisted through social changes, largescale changes in criminal justice systems, and changes in popular media types (Franks, 2016). True crime stories are told through many forms of media, including books, blogs, video essays, documentaries, television shows, and podcasts which all allow for information about noteworthy and interesting crimes to be told. Recently true crime has become a staple genre in the emerging media of podcasts (Boling and Hull, 2018). Buozis (2017) examined one of the top podcasts of all time, the first season of the National Public Radio (NPR) podcast *Serial*, which chronicled the trial and conviction of 18-year-old Adnan Syed for the 2000 murder of his ex-girlfriend, Hae Min Lee. *Serial* provided the narrative of Syed's story using not only the evidence presented in his case, but Syed's own voice. This is a common practice in modern true crime media, which allows for the criminal justice system and its practices to be examined with a critical lens (Buozis, 2017). This allows the genre to not only provide a warning about crime but also to cast a critical look at how the case was handled by police, the courts, and other aspects of the criminal justice system. The true crime genre has become a staple of popular media, not only because of its entertaining narratives but as a modern critical look at the evolution of crime and criminal justice systems.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory, proposed by George Gerbner in the 1960s, is centered on the idea that "television helps shape one's reality of the world—the more one sees certain ideas, images, or values, the more they become incorporated into one's reality" (Vicary & Zaikman, 2017, p. 52). When creating cultivation theory, Gerbner was critical of the new role that television had begun to play in people's lives; he noted the amount of time and attention that television occupied in viewers' minds as it was readily available and accessible to an audience of nearly any educational level (Morgan et al., 2015). He believed that the constant flow of messages from television could easily be absorbed into a wider audience than ever before because television tells its stories to all groups at once (Morgan et al., 2015). Television was able to access an excessively large audience and was not constrained by the barriers to this wide access that any other available media was subject to. Unlike books which require literacy or plays that require a person to be in physical attendance at a certain time, television could reach nearly any person with access to a television set.

Because the television audience was not limited to certain groups, Gerbner focused on the images or ideas contained in media content and establishing the relationships between exposure to media and audience beliefs and behaviors (Morgan et al., 2015). Gerbner's cultivation analysis questions whether those who watch more television will have similar views in opposition to those who consume less television, without regard to their demographic characteristics (Morgan et al., 2015). This theory brought on the idea of mainstreaming, which suggests that those who ingest large amounts of media, including books, movies, or television, begin to share similar perspectives without having similar

personalities or values because of heavy media consumption's role in replacing social or political influences that would usually influence individual perspectives (Intravia, Wolf, Paez, & Gibbs, 2017; Morgan et al., 2015). Much research has been inspired by cultivation theory and approximately 650 relevant studies had been published as of 2015 in relation to Gerbner's work (Morgan et al., 2016).

While much research focuses on violent media and how it may increase violent behavior (e.g., violent video games and violent behavior), cultivation theory is more interested in the perception changes that media may cause (Morgan et al., 2015). Originally cultivation theory was focused on the number of hours of television watched but more current use of the theory has placed a higher emphasis on the broader genre of media consumed (Morgan et al., 2015). Research conducted in this domain has found that watching a higher volume of crime-related television shows leads to an overestimation of the chances of victimization of a violent crime, as well as inaccurate ideas surrounding crime and law enforcement (Morgan et al., 2015; Vicary & Zaikman, 2017). One large concern of cultivation theory has been the messages that media portrays and how the audience interacts with them (Morgan et al., 2015). Eschholz et al. (2003) and Lett et al. (2009) both conducted research which indicated that exposure to crime-related or aggressive media can generate "a fear of crime or victimization among the viewers and influence their attitudes and behaviors in the real world" (as cited in Shah et al., 2020, p. 2). Holbert et al. (2004) additionally found that viewing crime-related content contributes to viewers' impressions about fear and violence (as cited in Morgan et al., 2015). This supports that the genre of media is important

in predicting how perceptions of violence are formed and suggests that violent media can influence perceptions of violence.

Audience of True Crime Media

As stated previously, men perpetrate a majority of the crimes that true crime media examines, but they do not make up a majority of the audience for this media. Vicary and Fraley (2010) found that women write the majority of reviews over true crime books on Amazon.com which supports that women make up a larger portion of the audience for true crime media compared to men. Additionally, they conducted a survey where they looked at book preference between men and women when offered a choice between a book about war and a book about true crime and separately a choice between a book about gangs and a book about true crime. They found that women were more likely to choose the true crime book (77%) over the war book (23%) compared to men who chose the true crime book (51%) and war book (49%) almost equally. When looking at the true crime book compared to the gang book, women were again much more likely to choose the true crime book (73%) over the gang book (27%) while men were a little more likely to choose the true crime book (57%) over the gang book (43%). This supports that women have a higher interest in true crime media compared to men. Vicary and Fraley (2010) also asked these women and men about how much they expected to enjoy their book choice and found that even the women who selected the war or gang book over the true crime book, did not anticipate enjoying it as much as the men who selected this book. In addition, they found that "women who chose the true crime book expected to enjoy it more than did the men who selected it" (p. 83). This

supports the notion that women have an increased interest in true crime-related media compared to men.

Additionally, Boling and Hull (2018) found that the audience for true crime podcasts is a majority female (73%). They also examined the differences in motivations between men and women for their consumption of true crime media. They found that despite men and women having the same top reported motivations to consume true crime media (entertainment, convenience, and boredom) women rated their motivations to consume true crime media higher than men did, indicating that women have a higher motivation to consume true crime media. When looking at differences in motivations between men and women, the motivations that differed the most between men and women included voyeurism, escape, and social interaction all of which were motivations that women scored higher in (p. 101). In this context, voyeurism refers to seeing into the mind of an assailant or listening to the personal lives of others; escape refers to escape from work or other life stresses; and social interaction refers to consuming true crime because it is popular with friends. This study suggests that women's top motivations to consume true crime media are not different than men's, just more salient. Two of the largest differences noted between women and men in motivations to consume true crime media can be linked to interest in social relationships (voyeurism and social interaction), which women may be more likely to focus on compared to men.

Perceptions of Victimization

When examining perceptions of victimization, it is fair to recognize that women generally tend to fear victimization more than men. Loukaitou-Sideris (2014) emphasized

that “fear of victimization and crime is quite widespread among women” and cited crime surveys conducted by Gordon and Riger (1989) which report that “women are more fearful of crime than men” (p. 242). While men are much more likely to be victims of violent crime, the category of violent crime where women make up a majority of the victims is sexual assaults (Callanan & Rosenburger, 2015). Much of women’s fear around crime may be due to a looming fear of sexual assault, deemed the “shadow hypothesis” by Warr (1984), which suggests that women’s fear of crime comes from the ever-present threat of sexual victimization (as cited in Callanan & Rosenburger, 2015).

As stated previously, research on cultivation theory finds a relationship between individuals' perceived likelihood of victimization and the amount of crime television exposure (Vicary & Zaikman, 2017). In related research, Eschholz, Chiricos, and Gertz (2003) indicated that viewers who were exposed to more crime-related news were more fearful of victimization (as cited in Shah et al., 2019, p. 2). In addition to this, it is important to note that, despite men having higher violent victimization rates, women are more often depicted as victims of crime in media (Bjornstrom et al., 2010; Chermak, 1995; Paulsten, 2003; Peelo et al., 2004; Prichard & Hughes, 1997; Weiss & Chermak, 1998, as cited in Callanan & Rosenburger, 2015; Parrott and Parrott, 2015). This media portrayal of women as victims may increase women’s fear of victimization because women frequently see themselves represented as victims in media. If women consume a large volume of true crime media that portrays women as the victims, this could contribute to an increased fear that they will become victims of a violent crime. Additionally, this fear of victimization could drive a

desire for women to learn more about crimes, through true crime media, in order to gain information, insight, knowledge, and tools to avoid victimization and protect themselves.

Personal Safety

When looking at perceptions of personal safety, a majority of the published data is collected in the context of the rates of crime in the area in which the study participants live. Hoffman et.al. (2018) found that people who perceived higher violence in their neighborhoods perceived much lower personal safety. The major difference between perceived personal safety reported by women and men in the study revolved around the threat of sexual violence. Hoffman et al. (2018) found that women who reported higher perceptions of sexual violence also reported less perceived safety and that women who reported lower perceptions of sexual violence reported higher perceived safety. In contrast to this, men who reported high and low perceptions of sexual violence reported a consistent level of personal safety, which was significantly lower than the reported personal safety of women who perceived lower sexual violence. In this study, sexual violence was the only type of violence that produced significantly different reports of perceived personal safety between men and women. Loukaitou-Sideris (2014) emphasized that the violence that women fear in public places often includes a wide range of actions such as "intimidation, groping, sexual comments, harassment, and threats" (p. 242). These listed dangers may all be linked to the looming fear of sexual violence that women live with.

Many of the crimes included in true crime media revolve around sexual violence, which are crimes predominately committed against women. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2019) women made up 90% of all reported victims of rape in the United

States. Women additionally face higher rates of sexual harassment. Stop Street Harassment, a nonprofit organization devoted to documenting and eradicating gender-based street harassment, conducted a study in 2018 on harassment and assault using a nationally representative sample of 2,000 individuals. This study found that 77% of these women reported that they had been sexually harassed; 51% reported that they had experienced unwanted sexual touching; 34% reported being physically followed by someone; 30% had experienced genital flashing; and 27% had experienced sexual assault. When looking at surveys of high school students Hill and Kearl (2011) found that more than 80% of students had been sexually harassed by the time they graduated (as cited in Nielsen, 2021). While the most common form of sexual harassment that high school students face is verbal harassment, the American Association of University Women, a non-profit organization that works to advance equity for women and girls through advocacy, education, and research, found that in just one school year 33% of female students in grades 7 through 12 had been victims of physical sexual harassment (Hill and Kearl, 2011, as cited in Nielsen, 2021). Girls face sexual harassment so frequently that they may fail to recognize the harassment for what it is (Nielsen, 2021). This is problematic, because these female high school students become women who may still not recognize sexual harassment.

Using the mainstreaming hypothesis, which suggests that exposures to certain types of media can create similar views in the groups who consume high volumes of this media, there is an argument to be made that those who have more knowledge of violent crimes would have similar views. Because of their acute awareness of these types of crimes, women who consume true crime media could be expected to report lower levels of personal safety.

Avoidance of Victimization

Many women practice daily behaviors in order to help them avoid victimization. When women see themselves as vulnerable, this creates a higher fear of crime which has an impact on how they live their lives and use public spaces (Vargas & Rosero, 2004, as cited in Garcia-Castro & Perez-Sanchez, 2018). According to Loukaitou-Sideris (2014), the "fear felt by many women leads to behavioral adjustments and precautions – not walking alone, avoiding certain settings, avoiding travel in the evening, not using public transportation, not wearing certain types of clothing or jewelry" (p. 249). These behaviors, often practiced out of fear, indicate the attention to avoidance of victimization that is practiced by women as they navigate their lives in public. A study looking at 990 college students found that female students, as well as those students who reported a higher fear of victimization and those students who reported a higher perceived likelihood of victimization, regardless of gender, participated in more protective behaviors (including avoidance of areas of campus during the day and at night, requesting a campus escort, carrying a self-defense product or weapon, and taking a self-defense course) (Hignite et al., 2018). Those who have a fear of victimization, such as women, perform more behaviors to avoid victimization, including self-protective behaviors and behavioral adjustments in order to avoid victimization.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on the literature, the hypotheses and research questions listed below were formulated:

Research Question 1: Is there a relationship between consumption of true crime media and perceived likelihood of victimization?

Hypothesis 1: It was predicted that women who reported higher consumption of true crime media would report higher perceived likelihood of victimization.

Research Question 2: Is there a relationship between consumption of true crime media and feelings of personal safety?

Hypothesis 2: It was predicted that women who reported higher consumption of true crime media would report lower feelings of personal safety.

Research Question 3: Is there a relationship between consumption of true crime media and preparedness to avoid victimization?

Hypothesis 3: It was predicted that women who reported higher consumption of true crime media would report higher preparedness to avoid victimization.

METHOD

Participants

172 undergraduate students from Angelo State University participated in this study. All participants were recruited through the online SONA system hosted by Angelo State University. All participant data was separated from identifying information to protect participants' anonymity as required by the Institutional Review Board. Of the participants, 82.6% identified as a woman, 15.1% identified as a man, .6% identified as a transgender woman, and 1.7% identified as non-binary/genderqueer (See Table 1).

Gender		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Woman	142	82.6%
	Transgender Woman	1	.6%
	Man	26	15.1%
	Non-binary/genderqueer	3	1.7%
	Total	172	100.0%

Table 1: ***Gender of Participants***

The age of participants ranged from 18 to 52 (*M* = 20.53, *SD* = 4.64) (See Table 2).

Age		Frequency	Percent
Valid	18	45	26.2%
	19	53	30.8%
	20	24	14.0%
	21	26	15.1%
	22	7	4.1%
	23	4	2.3%
	24	1	.6%
	27	2	1.2%
	30	1	.6%
	32	5	2.9%
	36	1	.6%
	37	1	.6%
	51	2	1.2%
	Total	172	100.0%

Table 2: ***Age of Participants***

The self-reported race/ethnicity of participants shows that 51.2% reported as White or European American, 33.7% as Hispanic or Latino, 10.5% as Black or African American, 2.3% as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2.3% as Mixed Race (See Table 3).

Race/Ethnicity		Frequency	Percent
Valid	White or European American	88	51.2%
	Hispanic or Latino	58	33.7%
	Black or African American	18	10.5%
	Asian / Pacific Islander	4	2.3%
	Mixed Race	4	2.3%
	Total	172	100.0%

Table 3: ***Race/Ethnicity of Participants***

Materials

All questionnaires used in this study were created by the researcher.

Demographic data. The demographics questionnaire (Appendix B) collected participants' age, gender identity, and race/ethnicity.

True crime consumption scale. Interest and volume of true crime consumption was measured by responses to 9 questions answered on a 5-point Likert scale (Appendix C). Example questions from this scale include "*I listen to true crime podcasts (e.g., Serial, Criminal, My Favorite Murder)*" and *"I have an interest in those who perpetrate violent crimes."*

Perception subscales. Three scales, each with 8 questions, were used to measure perceived likelihood of victimization (e.g., *I worry that I will be a victim of a violent crime),* perceptions of overall personal safety (e.g., *I feel safe when I am by myself),* and perceived preparedness to avoid victimization (e.g., *I am prepared to avoid dangerous situations*) (Appendix D). Responses to the questions on these scales were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = (definitely false) to 5 = (definitely true).

Procedure

Before conducting this survey, the researcher received approval from the Angelo State University Institutional Review Board (Appendix A). Participants in the study completed the survey about their interest in true crime media and perceptions of safety and victimization. The survey was conducted on Qualtrix, which is an online program that allows researchers to input their surveys and collect data from participants. Qualtrix did not collect the names of participants in order to keep their responses anonymous.

When beginning the study, participants were provided a link to Qualtrix, where they were shown an informed consent document to inform them that they were participating in a study investigating the impact that a genre of media has on perceptions. After reading the consent form and agreeing to participate in the study, participants were shown a definition of true crime stating that "True crime is a nonfiction genus of media that tells the stories of real crimes and the stories of the people related to these crimes." They were then asked to fill out the surveys created for this study. After completing the survey, they were shown a debriefing form which let them know that the study was conducting correlation research that generally aimed to discover if women who consume true crime media will report a greater level of perceived likelihood of victimization, a lower feeling of overall personal safety, and greater feelings of preparedness to avoid victimization compared to women who do not frequently consume true crime media. The debriefing also gave information on where to see the results of the study and contact information for the researchers. This is the point where participants received .5 SONA credit for their participation. After all data were collected, the data points were transferred from Qualtrix into a password-protected Dropbox that could only be accessed by the researcher.

RESULTS

A tertiary split was performed using frequency scores of true crime consumption. This allowed participants to be split into low, average, and high consumers using their mean score on the true crime consumption scale. The high (top third) and low (bottom third) of consumers were selected and identified as the high and low consumer groups.

A multivariate analysis (MANOVA*)* was conducted on participants with the dichotomous variable of high or low consumers as the independent variable, and the average scores for Perceived Likelihood of Victimization, Overall Feelings of Personal Safety, and Preparedness to Avoid Victimization as the three dependent variables. The research analyzed only the responses from female participants. Not surprisingly, female high consumers rated greater interest in true crime than low consumers, $F(1, 123) = 186.58$; $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .60$. This is expected because the low consumption group (M = 2.53, SD = .51) and the high consumption group (M = 4.09, SD = .37) were created using the True Crime Consumption variable.

There was also a significant difference between high and low consumers in response to Preparedness to Avoid Victimization, $F(1, 123) = 5.78$; $p = .018$, partial $\eta^2 = .45$, but in the opposite direction of the hypothesis. This means that those in the low consumption group actually scored significantly higher (M = 2.49, SD = .63) than those in the high consumption category (M = 2.22, SD = .62) Ssee Figure 1).

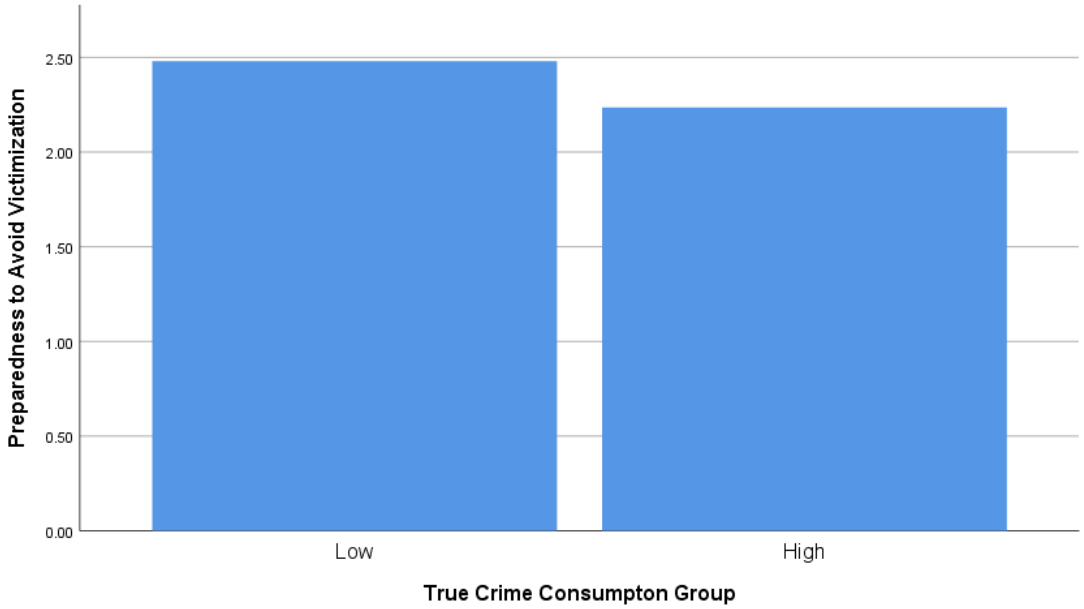

Figure 1: ***Significant*** **MANOVA (p < .05)** ***Finding/Preparedness to Avoid Victimization***

The MANOVA test found no significant differences between the high and low consumption groups when looking at the dependent variable of Perceived Likelihood of Victimization. $F(1, 123) = 1.17$; $p = .282$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$ Those in the low consumption category (M = 3.09, SD = .61) did not score significantly differently than those in the high consumption category (M = 2.97, SD = .61). When examining the dependent variable Overall Feelings of Personal Safety, those in the low consumption group (M = 2.92, SD = .33) did not score significantly differently than those in the high consumption category (M = 2.92, SD = .37) $F(1, 123) = 0.01$; $p = .938$, partial $\eta^2 = .00$.

In order to explore any potential differences between the women and men surveyed, a MANOVA was conducted using women and men as the dependent variables and using the same dependent variables as the previous analysis. Consistent with previous literature,

women scored significantly higher (M = 2.95, SD = .52) than men (M = 2.61, SD = .68), on consumption of true crime media $F(1, 109) = 10.80$; $p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$. Surprisingly, women scored significantly higher than men on Overall Feelings of Personal Safety $F(1, 123) = 4.05$; $p = .047$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$, but it is important to note that there were relatively few men in this study compared to women (142 women to 26 men) (See Figure 2).

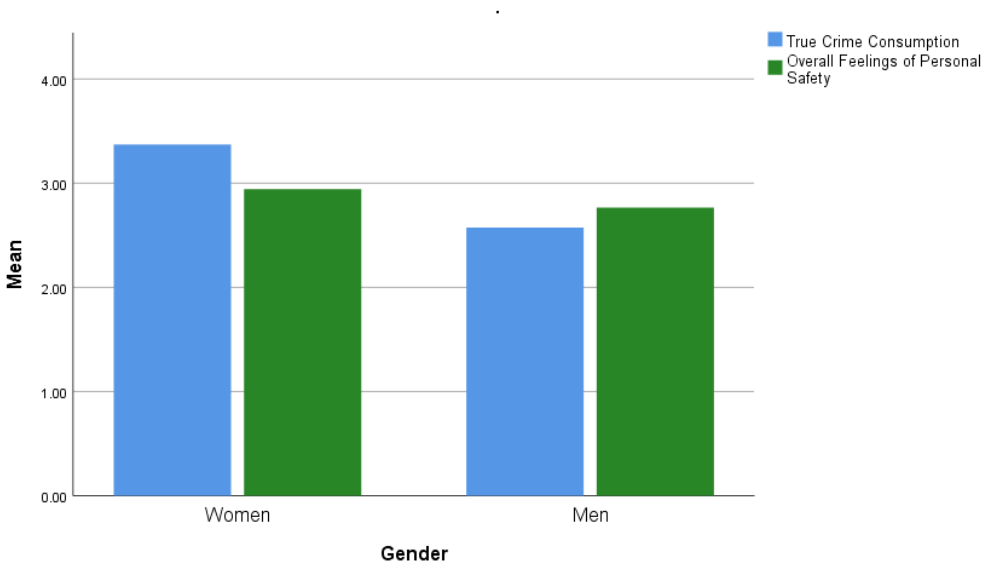

Figure 2: *Significant* MANOVA (p < .05) *Finding/ True Crime Consumption and Overall Feelings of Personal Safety*

Analysis revealed no significant difference between women and men on the Perceived Likelihood of Victimization variable $F(1, 123) = 1.88$; $p = .17$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. Women (M = 2.96, SD = .59) did not score significantly differently than men (M = 3.15, SD = .57). When examining the dependent variable Preparedness to Avoid Victimization, women (M = 2.43, SD = .62) did not score significantly differently than men (M = 2.35, SD = .54), $F(1, 123) = 0.35$; $p = .56$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$.

DISCUSSION

Although the original hypotheses were not supported, this study found one significant difference between women who are low and high true crime consumers. Women who consumed more true crime media reported feeling significantly *less* (instead of more) prepared to avoid victimization compared to those who were low consumers. This may be because those with more knowledge about true crime are aware that they cannot be totally prepared to avoid victimization of a violent crime. As established previously, an increase in crime media consumption can lead to an increase in fear of violent crime (Shah et al., 2020). This fear could cause a decrease in confidence that avoidance of crime is possible. It is possible that those who have less knowledge about true crime are more confident because they are not exposed to the ever-present dangers of violent crimes against women. Additionally, it is possible that actual preparedness (as opposed to reported preparedness) for a true crime-related attack is higher than reported for people who consume true crime media because of the knowledge they could have gained from the true crime media they interact with. For example, a woman who frequently listens to a true crime podcast may check the backseat of her car before getting in because of an awareness that someone could be hiding in her car. This potential difference could be explored using questions that examine actual knowledge about avoiding an attack.

While the study found no differences between the low and high female true crime consumers for overall feelings of personal safety, this could be a result of women generally feeling less safe in public because of a fear of harassment or worse (Callanan & Rosenburger, 2015). It is likely that most women who participated in this study have been put in situations

that make them aware of risks to their safety without the exposure to true crime media because of the high portion of women who have faced harassment (StopStreetHarassment.org, 2018). Additionally, women in college are exposed to frequent messaging about sexual violence and potential threats to their personal safety. Universities, such as Angelo State University, require title IX training for students coming to campus and run events and campaigns on campus to bring awareness to sexual violence and the resources available to students who face this type of violence. This could also contribute to the strong sense of personal safety reported by this study's participants.

The analysis between men and women in this study found that men reported lower feelings of personal safety compared to women. This finding is not consistent with past research looking at differences in women and men's perceptions of personal safety which state that women have an overall lower sense of personal safety (Hoffman et.al., 2018). This finding is likely due to the relatively low sample of men participating in this study which impacts the validity of the results of this analysis.

The variable of personal safety also could have been affected for all participants by the global COVID-19 pandemic which played a large part in the lives of participants during the period of Fall 2020 data collection. The Sars-CoV-2 virus has caused individuals to be limited in the public spaces that they can safely occupy and has increased many people's fear of going into public spaces, as they worry that they could contract the virus and become ill or spread the disease to loved ones. At the time of data collection people were unable to safely visit friends and family and were under a large amount of stress about the uncertain situation. Ramirez-Ortiz et al. (2020) noted that people dealing with pandemic-related stress and fear

have shown increased anxiety, feelings of loss of control, and less sense of overall well-being. They also considered that enforced isolation may aggravate existing tendencies of fearfulness or lead to the development of phobias in previously healthy individuals.

It is also interesting to note the significant difference between men and women in how often they consumed true crime media. The men in this study consumed much less true crime media than women, which is consistent with previous research that informed this study (Vicary & Fraley, 2010; Boling and Hull, 2018).

Limitations

There are limitations to the above project. This project looked solely at self-reported data which is inherently difficult to quantify as individuals may define or interpret questions or terms different and may intentionally or unintentionally underreport or overreport activities. Additionally, all data was collected from undergraduate students at a midsized institution in West Texas. The results of this study are limited to the perceptions of undergraduate students and cannot be reliably applied to other populations as differences in age, educational status, and location could significantly alter the results. Many of the students who participated in this study were in lower-level psychology classes, and recently may have been in high school meaning they have more experiences as high school students as opposed to college students. Additionally, the analyses done between men and women, while interesting, should not be given too much weight as the portion of men within the participant population was relatively small. It is also important to note that at the time of this survey, the COVID-19 pandemic was increasing public fear and anxiety, which may have skewed results.

In addition to these limitations, this study did not make distinctions between the consumers of different types of true crime media. Some consumers read books or listen to podcasts while others watch television or documentaries about true crime. There may be differences in the perspectives of those who watch these different types of media because they are exposed to media with different tones of discussion and varying levels of graphic or disturbing images.

With consideration to prior experiences of victimization, the researcher could have asked about prior experiences with violent crime as these experiences have an effect on perceptions surrounding personal safety and victimization. It also would have been interesting to ask about fears of different types of crimes because feelings of victimization may be different based on the type of crime such as sexual assault in opposition to robbery. There is still much to be addressed when looking at the potential effects of women's consumption of true crime media, including examining a more diverse sample of women, and examining knowledge of self-protection behaviors. It would also be interesting to see if there are differences that can be seen between men and women who are high consumers of true crime media (because of the different perceptions women have compared to men) or if they have similar perceptions.

Implications

This project has implications for the study of media consumption as well as the potential changes in perceptions that certain types of media may cause. The results of this study did not indicate that high consumption of true crime media increased fear of crime, because higher consumption did not have an effect on perceptions of victimization or

feelings of personal safety. This suggests that the central ideas of cultivation theory may need to be reevaluated as media consumption has changed vastly with the widespread availability of the internet and the constant exposure to violence that many people encounter online. Original cultivation theory is concerned with the central messages that media portrays, but as sources of media diversify in part because of the increased access to video and audio recording through new technology (such as smartphones) nearly anyone can create media with their own messages. There is no longer only one widely accessible form of media but many different forms of media available online that are all created by different people and organizations which all have their own ideas and agendas.

This project also has implications for the criminal justice system because true crime media may have an effect on perceptions of police or the courts. Much of true crime media looks very critically at how police investigate violent crime and how evidence was presented at court (Buozis, 2017). This may be problematic because most people living within the United States do not have direct experiences with crimes or the criminal justice system, leaving media about crime to shape their understanding of the criminal justice system (Roberts et al., 2003; Surette, 2001, as cited in Roche et al., 2016). Media coverage of crimes often focuses on the most extreme, rare, and newsworthy types of crimes; this media also displays inaccurate demographics of offenders and victims and reports more often on instances where law enforcement fails to properly protect victims and punish offenders (Gilliam & Lyengar 2000; Beckett & Sasson 2004; Dixon & Linz, 2000, as cited in Roche et al., 2016; Dolliver et al., 2018). Research supports that consumption of both news and entertainment media on crime lowers the confidence that individuals have in the criminal

justice system and increases support for punitive methods of crime control (such as three-strikes laws or mandatory minimum sentencing) (Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2011; Ramirez, 2013, as cited in Dolliver et al., 2018). This effect was especially true for types of media that blurred the line between news and entertainment (Holbert et al., (2004); Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2011; Oliver & Armstrong, 1995, as cited in Dolliver et al., 2018). True crime media definitely sits on that line between news and entertainment because it does tell the stories of real crime, but in a way that makes it interesting for the listeners and in a condensed version that necessarily omits nuances.

Extant research has found that some individuals who consume true crime media have a lower trust of police officers as a result of the critical view true crime media stories present. This impact on attitudes seen within true crime media parallels changes in attitudes seen with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement which began in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a man who shot 17-year-old Trayvon Martin while he was walking unarmed through a Sanford, Florida, neighborhood (Dunn, 2020). This movement has been critical of the United States criminal justice system for its mistreatment of Black individuals, especially Black men and boys, and has had a wide impact on the criminal justice system and public opinion surrounding the police and court systems within the United States (Dunn, 2020). As critical opinions of the criminal justice system place a spotlight on police brutality, and police officer's abuse of power, restoring confidence in police and criminal justice system is necessary. Studies examining the influence of media, such as true crime media, on attitudes about police and the criminal justice system are needed in order to understand the contributing factors to this distrust of the criminal justice system.

There are also implications in this study for higher education administrators involved in sexual harassment and violence education. The primary analysis of this study focused on female college students who were asked about their perceptions of victimization and overall feelings of personal safety. These students did not report varying perceptions of victimizations or feelings of overall personal safety between high and low true crime consumption groups. This indicate that true crime consumption did not mediate participants' reported sense of safety or concerns about becoming victims. It could be that Title IX sexual violence awareness programing that all students at public universities encounter makes college students already aware of these threats. But are college-aged women absorbing the content of Title IX training? Women in this study have been a part of this new environment of heightened awareness of the sexual harassment and violence that women frequently face, and this makes them a population that may react differently to information about violence, such as the information presented in true crime media or Title IX training. The results of this study indicate that these women may have become desensitized to the information that they encounter detailing threats to their personal safety because true crime media did not have any effect on their perceptions. Universities need to evaluate the efficacy of their sexual harassment and violence education programs as the women may not be internalizing the messages of the training. This may cause them to have less realistic expectations of their potential for victimization given that 20.5% of college women report experiencing sexual assault while attending college (Azimi et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Although women do not often perpetrate violent crime, they do fear it and their interest in true crime media is much higher than that of men who do perpetrate a majority of violent crime in the United States. Women's interest in true crime media may stem from many avenues such as entertainment, self-protection, interest in the lives of others, or a desire to bond with others. Cultivation theory suggests that watching violent crime media would increase fear of crime, but there was no strong evidence in this study to support that true crime media heightened fear of victimization or lowered feelings of personal safety. This may be a result of college-aged women being overexposed to information similar to what they encounter in true crime media through Title IX training and wider online media consumption. These women often do not have any personal experiences with violent crime outside of sexual harassment, which they may not recognize as such. It was expected that their habits of media consumption would mediate their feelings towards victimization, but this was not found through this study. The only significant finding, that those who consume less true crime media felt more prepared to avoid victimization, indicates that those with less knowledge of true crime media may feel more confident in their ability to avoid victimization because they may not understand the real risk that violent crime poses to them.

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APPENDIX A

ANGELO STATE UNIVERSITY
College of Graduate Studies
Institutional Review Board

7/28/2020

Dr. Teresa (Tay) Hack
Dept. of Psychology & Sociology
Angelo State University
San Angelo, TX 76909

Dear Tay:

The project that you submitted with your student Grace Kerestly titled, *"Media and Perceptions"* was reviewed and approved by Angelo State University's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Research Subjects in accordance with federal regulations 45 CFR 46.

This protocol has been approved effective July 28, 2020. If the study will continue past next year, please submit a notification of continuation at that time. Please note that any revisions to these approved materials must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation. All unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others, and any unexpected adverse events must be reported promptly to this office.

The approval number for your protocol is #HAC-072820. Please include this number in the subject line of in all future communications with the IRB regarding the protocol.

Sincerely,

Kim Livengood Digitally signed by Kim Livengood Date: 2020.07.29 09:17:10 -05'00'

Kimberly Livengood, Ph.D.
Reviewing Member, Institutional Review Board

Dr. Teresa Hack, IRB Chair | ASU Station #11025 | San Angelo, Texas 76909
Phone: (325) 486-6121 | Fax: (325) 942-2194
Member, Texas Tech University System | Equal Opportunity Employer

APPENDIX B

Demographics Questionnaire

How old are you?

a. _____

What gender category do you identify most with?

a. Woman
b. Transgender Woman
c. Man
d. Transgender Man
e. Nonbinary/genderqueer
f. Other (please specify)

What is your race/ethnicity?

a. White or European American
b. Hispanic or Latino
c. Black or African American
d. Native American or American Indian
e. Asian / Pacific Islander
f. Other (please specify)

APPENDIX C

True Crime Consumption Scale (1-5 Likert scale)

1. I am interested in true crime (e.g., Tv shows, books, podcasts).
    - 1 (strongly disagree)- 5 (strongly agree)
2. I watch true crime TV shows or documentaries (e.g., Making a Murderer, Forensic Files, ID (Investigation Discovery)).
    - 1 (never)- 2 (once a month)- 3 (2-3 times a month)- 4 (weekly)-5 (More than once a week)
3. I listen to true crime podcasts (e.g., *Serial, Criminal, My Favorite Murder*).
    - 1 (never)- 2 (once a month)- 3 (2-3 times a month)- 4 (weekly)-5(More than once a week)
4. I read about true crime (e.g., Books, Online News, Social Media).
    - 1 (never)- 2 (once a month)- 3 (2-3 times a month)- 4 (weekly)-5(More than once a week)
5. I watch videos online about true crime (e.g. YouTube videos).
    - 1 (never)- 2 (once a month)- 3 (2-3 times a month)- 4 (weekly)-5(More than once a week)
6. I do not like to learn details about true crime situations.
    - 1 (strongly disagree)- 5 (strongly agree)
7. I avoid anything related to true crime.
    - 1 (strongly disagree)- 5 (strongly agree)
8. I have an interest in those who perpetrate violent crime.

- 1 (strongly disagree)- 5 (strongly agree)

9. I have an interest in the victims of violent crime.

    - 1 (strongly disagree)- 5 (strongly agree)

APPENDIX D

Perceived likelihood of victimization

1. I believe that I will become a victim of a violent crime.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)
2. I believe it is unlikely that I will become a victim of a violent crime.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)
3. I must be cautious at all times so I can ward off a potential attack.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)
4. I worry that I will be a victim of a violent crime.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)
5. If I am not careful, I will be attacked.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)
6. If I am not careful, I will become a victim.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)
7. I feel that it is only a matter of time before something bad happens to me.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)
8. It is unlikely that I will be a victim of a violent crime, so I do not need to worry.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)

Overall Feelings of Personal Safety

9. When I walk alone at night, I feel incredibly vulnerable to attack.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)

10. The world is a safe place.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)
11. I feel safe when I am by myself.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)
12. It is difficult for me to interact with strangers because I fear they may hurt me.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)
13. When I am in public, I feel that I must be aware of my surroundings to keep myself safe.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)
14. I am fearful of people in the world around me.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)
15. When I ignore my surroundings, I am not putting myself in danger.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)
16. I do not need to be scared when I go about my life.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)

Preparedness to avoid victimization.

17. I feel that I am more aware of my surroundings than other people.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)
18. Other people are unaware of important warning signs of potential attack.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)
19. I have thought through how to escape from potentially dangerous situations.
    - 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)

20. I do not think much about bad things that could happen to me.

- 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)

21. I am prepared to avoid dangerous situations.

- 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)

22. I have talked to others about what to do if I go missing.

- 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)

23. I do not dwell on potentially dangerous situations.

- 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)

24. I am prepared to protect myself from strangers who could hurt me.

- 1 (definitely false)- 5 (definitely true)

BIOGRAPHY

Grace Kerestly was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan and moved to Abilene, Texas when she was 12 years old. She graduated summa cum laude with Highest University Honors from Angelo State University in May of 2021 with a Bachelor of Science in psychology and minors in art and gender studies. Grace was an active member of the Honors Program and Honors Student Association and also participated in Friday Art Club which encouraged her to submit multiple art pieces to student art shows throughout her undergraduate studies.

Grace received a year-long Undergraduate Research Faculty-Mentored Grant supervised by her faculty mentor, Dr. Teresa Hack, which allowed her to conduct this research. She presented elements of her research at the Midwest Psychological Association Conference in the Spring of 2021. Grace received the 2020-2021 Department of Psychology and Sociology Outstanding Research Award for her undergraduate research at ASU. Additionally, she served as an Honors Program Mentor for two years. Grace also served as a student board member for Open Arms Rape Crisis Center and LGBT Services and the Angelo Civic Theatre. Following graduation, she will take a year to get married and select a graduate program that will help to further her education.